

MADCAP

Drawing by the Author

BY GEORGE GIBBS

CHAPTER XXVI. The Seats of the Mighty

THE account of Olga's atrocious performance did not reach John Markham for some weeks. With the exception of the people who came to the studio and the few men he met at the club where he dined, he saw little of society, and troubled himself less with its affairs. He had given up hope of Hermia, and though her vision persisted it was not of the modish, self-contained creature who had received him so coolly that he thought. This was not the Hermia he had loved. That other girl, the joyous companion of his summer idyl, was no more—at times it seemed that she had never been.

He was writing to one of his sitters one afternoon when the knocker clanged and a man in livery entered bearing a note. He opened it and read:

MY DEAR MR. MARKHAM.—I must see you at once on a matter of importance. Can you come up this afternoon for a dish of tea? I'm sending my car for you in the hope that your engagements will not forbid. If anything prevents today, won't you lunch with me tomorrow at two?

Very sincerely yours, SARAH HAMMOND.

Markham frowned. There was no getting out of it, it seemed.

HE found her at the tea table, a stout but puissant figure in mauve and black. In the studio she had not bothered him. She had been merely an amiable millionaire, in pearls and black satin. Here in the majestic drawing room, with her small court gathered about her, she dominated him. He hesitated a second at the door before going forward; but when she saw him she rose at once and excused herself to her guests. After their departure she motioned him to a chair beside her and entered without delay upon her subject. Her manner was kindly, if restrained, and he saw at once that the matter was of a personal nature.

"I suppose, Mr. Markham, you think it rather curious that I should have sent for you in such haste; but I shouldn't have done so had I not thought it necessary. You understand that, don't you?"

Markham murmured something, and waited for her to go on.

"It seems a little difficult to begin; for there are some matters that are not easy even with a friend."

"I am sure, if there is anything in which I can help you—"

"There is, Mr. Markham. I should not have dared to speak to you if I hadn't, unfortunately, found myself brought into an affair in which your name has been mentioned."

"My name?"

"Yes. Yours and Miss Challoner's."

He blanched, and was immediately conscious that her small eyes were watching him keenly. "Wh-what have you heard, Mrs. Hammond?" he blurted out.

"One moment, Mr. Markham. I don't want you to think that I am the kind of woman who seeks to pry into the affairs of other people. I don't. I abominate meddlers, and will have nothing to say, even if after I tell you what my motives are you refuse to answer my questions. But a great wrong has been done, an advantage taken of my hospitality. I speak of the theatricals that took place at my house in the country last month."

He stared at her blankly, and she smiled.

"I forgot," she went on, "what a hermit you are. Of course you have not heard." She leaned over the tea table and took a slip of paper from under a tea dish. "I shall let you read this, so that you may know in just what terms New York is speaking of you—of me—of us."

She handed him the clipping. It was from a weekly paper, which concerned itself with the doings of society, and he read, his eyes glowing:

The much heralded theatricals at Roods Knoll have come and gone; but the echoes of this affair are still reverberating the length of the avenue. It seems that the very clever play, written by a well known woman of society, was based upon fact, and that the hero and heroine of the adventures depicted are in New York, the girl in question a member of the hunting set, and the man a distinguished portrait painter—both of whom shall be nameless. As everyone knows, the play is laid in rural France, and deals with the loves of a French Countess who has fled from her husband to join her lover, also married, upon the road, where they become members of a band of strolling mountebanks, the lady masquerading as a "Dame Orchestre" and the gentleman as an itinerant painter of portraits—

MARKHAM stopped, his eyes seeking those of his hostess. "The play was given," he said hoarsely, "at your house?"

"It was, Mr. Markham," she said simply. "Read it through to the end, please."

He did so, his horror increasing as the full significance of the description grew upon him. Hermia had seen, had read, this! They were talking about her and about him! He could not understand.

"You said that Miss—Miss Challoner's name had been mentioned—and mine," he said slowly. "There is no name mentioned here. The identity of the people—"

"Your names have been mentioned, Mr. Markham, in my presence. The story back of this vile clipping is on the lips of every gossip in town. Where it originated Heaven only knows; but facts are given, and dates, which make it ugly in the extreme. I thought it best that you should know, and sent for you to assure you that I had no knowledge about the play and its possible reference to anyone."

"The play," he asked quietly, "was written by Madame Tcherny?"

She nodded, her eyes regarding him soberly. "What shall I do, Mr. Markham? If there is some basis of truth in the reports I hear, I have been grossly imposed upon, and whatever the facts they have done a great wrong both to you and Hermia. Unfortunately she has left New York, and I don't know where to find her. She left town, I am informed, the day after the play was given. I wish she hadn't. It makes things awkward for me. I have the best intentions in the world; but if she ties my hands by silence what can I do?"

Markham had risen and was pacing the floor slowly, his head bent, all his thoughts of Hermia. Olga's cruelty stunned him. She had promised not to speak. Had she spoken other than in this ingenious drama? Or was it De Folligny? His fists clenched and his jaws worked forward. De Folligny—a man! Here was something tangible—a man, not a woman, to deal with! He turned and stood beside the tea table, struggling for the control of his voice.

"Who has told this story, Mrs. Hammond?" he asked at last.

She shrugged her capacious shoulders and settled her head forward in his direction. "Frankly, I don't know. Thank God I'm not in any way responsible for that part of this misfortune! I only know that Olga Tcherny wrote the play. As to her motives in doing so, I am at a loss. But if I thought she used my house, violated my hospitality at the expense of one of my guests, to serve some private end, I would—" The good lady grew red in the face, and then controlling herself for a moment, "I would find some means of getting her the punishment she deserved. Hermia Challoner was there," she went on quickly. "Her appearance was marked. She looked ill, and left the house before supper. You were invited too, Mr. Markham, if you will remember; but would not come. I confess I'm at my wits' ends. I will not question you. All I ask is your advice."

Markham raised his head and looked her in the eyes for a full moment. She was much distressed at her position, and the friendliness of her look was all that could be desired. He hesitated a moment, weighing his duty with his inclination. What was the best for Hermia? How could he serve her? How build a bulwark to dike the flood of scandal that threatened her in her flight? A lie? Obviously that wouldn't do; for Mrs. Hammond believed in him. And the story had gone too far, was too diabolic in its accuracy, for a flat denial without explanation. The truth?

HIS hostess still regarded him patiently. He searched her with his eyes, his gaze finally falling.

"If one is guiltless, one does not fear the truth," he muttered slowly, "nor does virtue fear a lie; but a half-truth will damn even the innocent, Mrs. Hammond."

"There is some basis then, for the stories they are telling?" she asked kindly.

"My lips have been sealed. I'm not sure that I have the right to open them now; but I will. I don't think I could pay you a higher compliment than by trusting Miss Challoner's fate entirely into your hands."

Mrs. Hammond, now keenly interested, smiled at him encouragingly. "Thanks, Mr. Markham. I'm not so old that I have forgotten how to be human."

He glanced round the room and lowered his voice. "You know—Hermia—Miss Challoner very well, Mrs. Hammond?"

"Since her infancy,—a creature of moods, wilful, wayward if you like, but the soul of honor and virtue."

He bowed his head. "Thanks. You make it easier for me," he said. "I want you to understand first, Mrs. Hammond, that I alone am responsible for this misfortune. Miss Challoner and I met upon the highroad in

Normandy, entirely by chance. I was doing the country afoot, as is my custom in summer. Her machine was destroyed in an accident. She was alone. I asked her to go with me. She accepted my invitation. It was mad of me to ask her, mad of her to accept; but she did accept. We were together more than a week, traveling afoot by day, sleeping in the open when the weather was fine and indoors when I could find a room for her. I had moments of inquietude at my responsibility; for I had done wrong in letting her go with me. She was a child and trusted me. I began by being amused. I ended by— Good God! Mrs. Hammond, I loved—I worshipped her! I couldn't have harmed her—she was sacred to me—and is now. You must understand that."

His hostess' expression, which had grown grave during this recital, relaxed a little. "I think I understand, Mr. Markham. I am keenly interested. Where does Olga Tcherny come in?"

Her question bothered him. He thought for a moment, and then went on, deliberately postponing a reply.

OUR relations were clearly established from the first. We had met before, you know, earlier in the summer, and I had visited at Westport. She liked and understood me, and was sensible enough to tell me so; and I—she attracted me curiously. I had always lived a solitary sort of existence. She simply ignored my prejudices and overrode them. She invaded my life and took it by storm. She was like the sudden *capriccioso* after the *largo* in a symphony. She was Youth and Joy, and she got into my blood like an elixir. I loved her for all the things she was that I was not; but I did not tell her so—not then. I hid my secret; for I knew that if she guessed it would make a difference to us both."

He raised his head and went on more rapidly. "We joined a company of strolling mountebanks—oh, that was true enough—and went with them as far as Alençon. Hermia—Miss Challoner—was a Dame Orchestre, and I a 'lightning' artist. We made our living in that way. It was quite wonderful how she played; wonderful how she forgot what she was, how she became what I wanted her to be, an earthing among earthings. With them she lived in poverty and discomfort, learned the meaning of weariness, and felt the pinch of hunger." He smiled. "I suppose you wonder why I'm telling you all this, Mrs. Hammond. I wanted you to understand just what the pilgrimage was, how little it had in common with—with what you have heard these people saying."

"I know, Mr. Markham. I understand," she said gently. Her eyes softened, and she looked past him as though back through a vista of the years. "It was Romance—the true Romance!" she murmured. "She borrowed a week from Immortality—that for once she might be herself. She was free from this thralldom—free!"

"She worked hard," he went on after a moment, "and she earned what money she made. And so did I. But I was bothered. My sins were pursuing me. One day we saw on the road a man Miss Challoner had met, and at Alençon—"

"Olga Tcherny?" asked Mrs. Hammond keenly.

Markham paused, looked beyond her, and went on.

"And at Alençon, when we were giving a performance, someone I knew appeared and recognized me. Need I mention names?"

"Not if you prefer to be silent. And the hunting lodge?"

"We fled from Alençon that night and took refuge from the rain in a house in the forest. Miss Challoner was dead tired. We had been up since sunrise. So we stayed there, thinking ourselves safe. But in the morning—"

He paused. Mrs. Hammond had risen and was fingering the flowers on the tea table. "In the morning," she finished dryly, "Olga Tcherny found you there. I understand."

He rose and faced her uncomprehendingly. "Mrs. Hammond, do you mean that you believe—as she did?"

She turned quickly and thrust forth both of her plump, jeweled hands, and he saw that her friendliness was in no way diminished.

"I'm not one to believe half-truths, Mr. Markham, when I hear whole ones," she said, smiling ready. "If you had lied to me, I should have known it. But you didn't, and I believe in you." She released his hand and made him sit again. "I've never been so entertained and delighted since—since hundreds of years ago," she sighed. "You were mad, quite mad, both of you. And Hermia—" she stopped, sat quickly upright, and while he watched her laughed deliberately. "Her-